

## **Why the News Is Not the Truth**

by Peter Vanderwicken

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*News and the Culture of Lying: How Journalism Really Works*, Paul H. Weaver (The Free Press, 1994).

*Who Stole the News?: Why We Can't Keep Up with What Happens in the World*, Mort Rosenblum (John Wiley & Sons, 1993).

*Tainted Truth: The Manipulation of Fact in America*, Cynthia Crossen (Simon & Schuster, 1994).

The U.S. press, like the U.S. government, is a corrupt and troubled institution. Corrupt not so much in the sense that it accepts bribes but in a systemic sense. It fails to do what it claims to do, what it should do, and what society expects it to do.

The news media and the government are entwined in a vicious circle of mutual manipulation, mythmaking, and self-interest. Journalists need crises to dramatize news, and government officials need to appear to be responding to crises. Too often, the crises are not really crises but joint fabrications. The two institutions have become so ensnared in a symbiotic web of lies that the news media are unable to tell the public what is true and the government is unable to govern effectively. That is the thesis advanced by Paul H. Weaver, a former political scientist (at Harvard University), journalist (at *Fortune* magazine), and

corporate communications executive (at Ford Motor Company), in his provocative analysis entitled *News and the Culture of Lying: How Journalism Really Works*.

## **Journalists and politicians have become ensnared in a symbiotic web of lies that misleads the public.**

Take, for example, the long effort in the 1980s to eliminate the federal deficit, centered on the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Amendment. For several years, newspapers, magazines, and television newscasts ran hundreds of stories on the debates over Gramm-Rudman, the views of all sorts of experts on the urgent need for deficit reduction, and the eventual enactment of the legislation. Politicians postured—and were described—as working diligently to get a grip on the deficit. Anyone who read a newspaper or watched television news received the message that Congress and the Reagan administration were heroically and painfully struggling to contain government spending and reduce the deficit.

Behind the smoke screen, however, congressional committees and federal officials were increasing spending and adding new programs in the routine annual budgeting and appropriations processes. When journalists reported on a new program, they usually characterized it as good news—the government tackling another problem—rather than as an addition to the budget and the deficit. Journalists conspired with politicians to create an image of a government fighting to end the deficit crisis, but they ignored the routine procedures that increased the deficit. As a result, Weaver writes, “there were no news stories about government adding to the deficit even though that was what was happening.”

The news media and the government have created a charade that serves their own interests but misleads the public. Officials oblige the media's need for drama by fabricating crises and stage-managing their responses, thereby enhancing their own prestige and power. Journalists dutifully report those fabrications. Both parties know the articles are self-aggrandizing manipulations and fail to inform the public about the more complex but boring issues of government policy and activity.

What has emerged, Weaver argues, is a culture of lying. "The culture of lying," he writes, "is the discourse and behavior of officials seeking to enlist the powers of journalism in support of their goals, and of journalists seeking to co-opt public and private officials into their efforts to find and cover stories of crisis and emergency response. It is the medium through which we Americans conduct most of our public business (and a lot of our private business) these days." The result, he says, is a distortion of the constitutional role of government into an institution that must continually resolve or appear to resolve crises; it functions in "a new and powerful permanent emergency mode of operation."

The architect of the transformation was not a political leader or a constitutional convention but Joseph Pulitzer, who in 1883 bought the sleepy *New York World* and in 20 years made it the country's largest newspaper. Pulitzer accomplished that by bringing drama to news—by turning news articles into *stories* with a plot, actors in conflict, and colorful details. In the late nineteenth century, most newspaper accounts of government actions were couched in institutional formats, much like the minutes of a board meeting and about as interesting. Pulitzer turned them into stories with a sharp dramatic focus that both implied and aroused intense public interest. Most newspapers of the time looked like the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* still does. Pulitzer made stories dramatic by adding blaring headlines, big pictures, and eye-catching graphics. His journalism took events out of their dry, institutional contexts and made them emotional rather than rational, immediate rather than

considered, and sensational rather than informative. The press became a stage on which the actions of government were a series of dramas.

Pulitzer's journalism has become a model for the multistage theater of recent decades. The rise of television has increased the demand for drama in news, and the explosion in lobbyists and special-interest groups has expanded the number of actors and the range of conflicts.

Business had to learn to play the game as well. Indeed, in recent decades, roughly since the founding of the Business Roundtable in the late 1970s, many companies have become adept at promoting the version of reality they want the public and government officials to believe. Weaver himself was hired at Ford as, in effect, a corporate propagandist. Companies now routinely use persuasion and image making, whether to attract political allies through philanthropy (Philip Morris Companies), to promote their economic interests (Mobil Oil Corporation), or to deflect critics of their products and processes (McDonald's Corporation).

As a result, business has become a prominent player in the manipulation of perception and in the corruption of the public policy process. Weaver recounts that during his years at Ford, executives were given scripts before being interviewed by journalists to ensure that they would make the points the company wished to make: "They were literally performing." What the scripts said was almost never what people in the company really thought but what Ford wanted the media, the government, and the public to think.

When President Jimmy Carter asked the 400 largest corporations to limit wage and price increases to contain inflation in 1978, most Ford Motor executives were cynical and thought the move would make inflation worse. But that isn't what they said. Ford issued a statement welcoming the president's initiative and endorsing its goal. The company noted that, although its own pricing plans

called for increases greater than the president's guidelines, it supported his program. Ford's image makers decided that it would be politically dangerous to oppose the anti-inflation effort publicly and hoped that the company's seeming support would help restrain its suppliers from increasing prices and its workers from demanding higher wages. Ford's statement itself was a cynical lie.

At Ford, Weaver learned that news often has a dual identity, an external façade and an internal reality, much like the Japanese duality of *tatemae* (appearance) and *honne* (reality). "On the surface there was a made-up public story put out for the purpose of manipulating others in ways favorable to the story makers," he writes. "Behind that was another story, known to those immediately involved and to outsiders with the knowledge to decode it, concerning the making of the public story and the private objectives it was meant to advance. The two stories, or realities, were often wildly at odds with each other. In the real world, the role of the press was to promote public illusions and private privilege."

The press corrupts itself, the public policy process, and the public's perceptions, Weaver argues, when it seeks out and propagates dueling cover stories, with their drama, conflict, and quotable advocates, but fails to discover or report the underlying realities. The press prints the news but not the truth. It reports in detail the competing propaganda of the conflicting interests but largely neglects the substance of the issue in conflict. A recent example is the coverage of the health care debate. The Media Research Center studied the television networks' evening newscasts between June 15 and July 15, 1994. Of the 68 reports on health care reform, 56 focused on political aspects, and only 12 dealt with the economic or individual impacts of various proposals, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*.

The media's practice of focusing on the manipulators and their machinations rather than on substantive issues is perhaps unavoidable because it reflects several aspects of American

culture. Personalities are more compelling than institutions, facts are often uncertain, attention spans (and television sound bites) are brief, and simplification—often oversimplification—is the norm. But the media’s focus on façades has several consequences.

One is that news can change perceptions, and perceptions often become reality. Adverse leaks or innuendos about a government official often lead to his or her loss of influence, resignation, or dismissal. The stock market is also fertile ground for planted stories. Rumors or allegations spread by short sellers often drive a stock’s price down. There may be nothing wrong with either the official’s performance or the stock’s value, but the willingness of the press to report innuendos and rumors as news changes reality. The subjects of such reports, which are usually fabrications created by opponents, must be prepared to defend themselves instantly. The mere appearance of a disparaging report in the press changes perceptions and, unless effectively rebutted, will change reality and the truth. That is why government officials and politicians—and, increasingly, companies and other institutions—pay as much attention to communications as to policy.

Indeed, much of what appears in the newspapers as business news is nothing more than corporate propaganda. When I was an executive at a large public-relations agency, I was often amused to observe how many of the stories in the *Wall Street Journal* and the business section of the *New York Times* were essentially news releases the agency had issued the previous day. On some days, most of the stories were clearly identifiable as coming—some nearly word for word—from announcements by corporations or government agencies.

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In an environment in which perceptions can quickly affect policy, companies need to be as alert and aggressive as politicians, government officials, and other interest groups are in ensuring that their positions are favorably represented in the media. New technology can often help them respond quickly to challenges, accusations, or misstatements. An incident that happened when I managed communications for a large global bank illustrates the ability of organizations to influence the presentation of news and hence the perceptions of the public and of government officials. A *Wall Street Journal* reporter finished interviewing bank officials on a complex and sensitive matter at about 5 p.m. in New York City. Three hours later, at 8 a.m. in Hong Kong, his story appeared in the *Journal's* Asian edition. The bank's Hong Kong office faxed us the story, which had interpreted our position somewhat unfavorably. My office promptly called the *Journal's* copy desk in New York City to clarify the bank's position. A more favorable account appeared the next morning in the newspaper's European and U.S. editions.

One consequence of the prevalence of propaganda in the press is that the public's confidence in all institutions gradually erodes. As people begin to realize that they are being misled, manipulated, and lied to, they resent it. From 1973 to 1993, only Congress fell further in public esteem than the press, according to surveys of public confidence by the University of Michigan. The decline in confidence reflects a widening feeling that the news media are contentious, unfair, inaccurate, and under the thumb of powerful institutions, a 1989 survey by Gallup for the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press concluded.

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Perhaps the most serious consequence of journalists' focus on crises and conflicts is that both they and the public become blind to systemic issues. The focus on the politics of Gramm-Rudman

obscured the fact that, for complex institutional reasons, government spending and deficits were continuing to rise. The savings-and-loan debacle of the 1980s became so large and costly because the press was unable to focus on it until it became a crisis. The legislative mistakes and policy failures that had caused it were too complex, too hard to explain, and too boring. Until there was a rash of savings-and-loan failures, enabling the press to show front-page pictures of angry depositors trying to withdraw their money, there was no news and no crisis, and government was unable to respond.

The press's inability to report events or trends that are not crises is not limited to public affairs and domestic news. In his amusing and anecdotal book *Who Stole the News?: Why We Can't Keep Up with What Happens in the World*, longtime Associated Press special correspondent Mort Rosenblum argues that foreign correspondents sacrifice coverage of important but undramatic long-term trends in favor of dramatic events whose real importance may be minimal. Coups and earthquakes, he says, are what editors want to report. But when reporters try to cover "crucial trends taking shape at the normal pace of human events—slowly...editors have trouble packaging them."

Rosenblum, like Weaver, argues that the press is far too willing to accept government officials' self-promoting versions of events. He quotes Reuven Frank, a former president of NBC News, as asserting, "News is whatever the goddamn government says it is." In a long account of the United Nations operation in Somalia a couple of years ago, Rosenblum contends that the German air force was far more efficient and effective in delivering aid than U.S. forces were. Yet few U.S. readers or viewers learned anything about the Germans' work or even knew that Germans had participated in the relief effort.

What we learn about foreign news is as dependent on crises and dramatic pictures as our domestic news is. "The system is geared as much to amuse and divert as it is to inform," Rosenblum writes,



“and it responds inadequately when suddenly called upon to explain something...complex and menacing.”

Weaver makes a similar point. The real failing of the press, he argues, is that it has become a victim of the man-bites-dog syndrome. “What’s actually going on in the real world is the ordinary business of ordinary institutions,” he writes. “What officials and reporters converge on, therefore, are travesties, not real events. The news stops representing the real world and begins to falsify it. The barter transaction between newsmaker and journalist degenerates into an exercise in deceit, manipulation, and exploitation.”

The debate on health care reform of the past two years could prove to be a turning point in the destructive cycle. Despite a massive effort by the Clinton administration to whip up a sense of crisis and of the need for urgent reform, and despite intensive press coverage of the competing proposals and viewpoints, the result so far has been a stalemate. Surveys, including one conducted in November 1993 by Fabrizio, McLaughlin & Associates for *National Review*, found that roughly 80% of U.S. citizens are satisfied with the quality of their present health care. On an issue with which people have firsthand experience and a direct interest, all the propaganda and manipulation have been for naught. When people can rely on their own knowledge and experience in forming opinions, even such a massive effort to effect change does not work. The midterm election results suggest that the U.S. electorate has become so distrustful of Congress and of government in general that it will eject any politician who would increase the power or intrusiveness of government.

Yet when people don’t have personal experience or sound information, they can easily be persuaded by a crisis story. The Alar pesticide scare of 1989 is one example. Alar was a pesticide sprayed on apples, and studies for the Environmental Protection Agency found that it caused tumors in laboratory animals that had been given high doses. Many apple growers had already stopped using it; by 1989, Alar was sprayed on less than 40%, and

perhaps as little as 5%, of the country's apples. But an environmental activist group thought that the EPA was too slow to ban it outright. The group did a statistical study called a risk assessment, based on dubious data, and concluded that Alar was dangerous to children, who eat more apples than adults do relative to their body weight. It arranged for its study to be released in an exclusive story on CBS's *60 Minutes*, and the result was a national panic.

The press swarmed on the story, which had all the necessary dramatic elements: a foot-dragging bureaucracy, a study finding that the country's favorite fruit was poisoning its children, and movie stars opposing the pesticide. Sales of apples collapsed. Within months, Alar's manufacturer withdrew it from the market, although both the EPA and the Food and Drug Administration stated that they believed Alar levels on apples were safe. The outcry simply overwhelmed scientific evidence.

That happens all too often, Cynthia Crossen argues in her book *Tainted Truth: The Manipulation of Fact in America*. Although her writing is lax and references to sources are inadequate, the book nonetheless extends Weaver's argument in several important respects. Crossen, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, focuses on how advocates of policy positions and companies promoting products misuse scientific research to further their objectives.

Wary of making decisions based on opinion or belief, the U.S. public has come to rely on facts, data, surveys, and presumably scientific studies. People are increasingly reluctant to believe any assertion that is not supported by statistical research. Yet, Crossen writes, "more and more of the information we use to buy, elect, advise, acquit and heal has been created not to expand our knowledge but to sell a product or advance a cause."

A growing industry has thus developed to create the research to legitimize policy positions or marketing objectives. Public policy debates now commonly revolve around competing estimates of

cost, effectiveness, or risk, rather than around the intrinsic merits of a proposal. Much of the health care debate raged around differing estimates of the numbers of citizens without health coverage and the costs of the various proposals to cover them. When President Bill Clinton promised Congress that he would rely on the forecasts of federal spending and deficits of the Congressional Budget Office rather than on those of the executive branch's Office of Management and Budget, the representatives and senators cheered; they consider the CBO's forecasts to be more favorable to Congress's spending proclivities than those of the more cautious OMB.

Companies routinely use research studies to promote products or positions. White bread won't cause you to gain weight and is nutritious, a study by the Cooper Institute for Aerobic Research found. Its sponsor: the maker of Wonder Bread. Chocolate may actually inhibit cavities, concluded a study by the Princeton Dental Resource Center, which is funded by Mars, the maker of M&M's and other chocolate candies. The U.S. public's faith in so-called scientific research gives the studies impact, even when they contradict common sense and are patently self-serving. "Most members of the media are ill-equipped to judge a technical study," Crossen correctly points out. "Even if the science hasn't been explained or published in a U.S. journal, the media may jump on a study if it promises entertainment for readers or viewers. And if the media jump, that is good enough for many Americans."

Crossen is particularly critical of the overuse and misuse of polls. How questions are worded and how samples are chosen can have a huge impact on the responses. In a 1992 mail-in questionnaire in an ad for Ross Perot in *TV Guide*, one question read, "Should the President have the Line Item Veto to eliminate waste?" Yes, 97% of respondents said. But when the question was reworded, "Should the President have the Line Item Veto, or not?" and asked of a scientifically selected random sample, only 57% said yes.

The press loves polls and surveys. They're a surefire way to get publicity—even if the survey is scientifically, socially, or economically meaningless. The first question a smart public relations person asks a client is “What can we do a survey about?” A survey, however inane or irrelevant, will get the client's name in the papers. A 1993 survey by the Southern Baptist Convention found that 46.1% of the people in Alabama risk going to hell; Crossen doesn't say how it arrived at that conclusion. A 1991 Roper survey found that 2% of Americans may have been abducted by unidentified flying objects; Crossen doesn't say who the sponsor was. “That's what surveys do,” a Roper pollster says. “They basically manufacture news.” Political scientist Lindsay Rogers, by the way, coined the word *pollster* as a pejorative takeoff of the word *huckster*. Crossen calls them “pollers.”

Concocted or inaccurate surveys and studies taint our perceptions of what is true, and they distort public policy debates. Crossen concurs with Weaver that the media's desire for drama encourages the distortion and corruption of public decision making. “The media are willing victims of bad information, and increasingly they are producers of it. They take information from self-interested parties and add to it another layer of self-interest—the desire to sell information.”

Both Crossen and Weaver end their books with lengthy lists of proposals for reforms. Crossen suggests that high schools should teach students the basics of statistics and how to tell whether numbers are believable. News organizations should train journalists in statistical analysis and should devote more space to describing the research methodology. Every story about research should identify the sponsor and describe its interest in the outcome or impact of the research. And the media should stop producing information that serves only to feed their own interests.

Weaver's solutions are more sweeping, fundamental, and difficult. He argues that the press should cover crises and disasters less and political, social, and economic events more: less

politics, more substance; less on personalities, more on institutions. When the president holds a press conference, for example, the press should cover all of its substance in a single article headed “Presidential Press Conference.”

That is quixotic and will never happen. It would be a return to pre-Pulitzer journalism. The media’s desire to attract an audience and the audience’s inability to concentrate for long would make such a format impossible. Equally unrealistic is another of Weaver’s recommendations. He urges news organizations to “establish a culture of responsibility and deliberation.” Anyone who has ever been in a newsroom at deadline knows how far that notion is from reality. Weaver also suggests that the media’s focus should be reoriented toward readers and away from advertisers and that media monopolies should be broken up. The rapid advance of information age technology—hundreds of cable television channels, the growth of specialized media, the spread of computer information resources—is certain to give citizens access to far more diverse sources of information and is likely to force the media to reinvent the ways in which they present news and other information.

But none of those changes are likely to alter the persistence of Weaver’s conundrum. A press driven by drama and crises creates a government driven by response to crises. Such an “emergency government can’t govern,” Weaver concludes. “Not only does public support for emergency policies evaporate the minute they’re in place and the crisis passes, but officials acting in the emergency mode can’t make meaningful public policies. According to the classic textbook definition, government is the authoritative allocation of values, and emergency government doesn’t authoritatively allocate values.”

In such an environment, the actors who most skillfully create and manipulate crises determine the direction of change. In the 1994 congressional elections, those actors were clearly the Republicans. Many of the reforms they advocate—such as the line-item veto, the restructuring of congressional committees and

staffs, and the devolution of powers to the states—would, if implemented, tend to offset the dynamics of Pulitzerian journalism. Those reforms would help return the debate to the merits rather than the politics of government policies. And that would reduce the pressures on and the ability of government to respond to crises with emergency action and would return the development of policy to a steadier, more constitutional path.

The change in U.S. government would be revolutionary and would over time reduce the pressures on businesses to respond instantly to attacks and crises. For some years to come, however, businesses are likely to need more corporate propagandists, not fewer.

A version of this article appeared in the May–June 1995 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

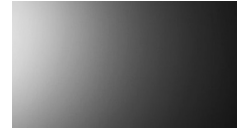
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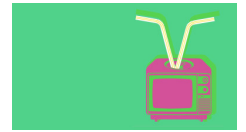
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